

Six Feet of the Country

Short Story by Nadine Gordimer



READING 2C Relate the characters, setting, and theme of a literary work to the historical, social, and economic ideas of its time. **5A** Analyze how complex plot structures and devices function and advance the action in a work of fiction.

DID YOU KNOW?

Nadine Gordimer . . .

- published her first short story at the age of 15.
- was confined to her house from ages 10 to 16 with a heart condition.
- refused a literary award for which only women could be considered.

Meet the Author

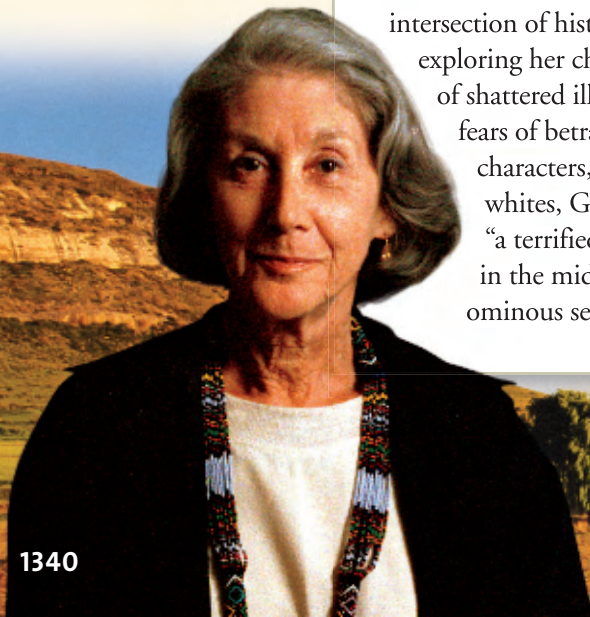
Nadine Gordimer born 1923

Nadine Gordimer credits her love of books with saving her from the belief that there was only one way to live. Born into a white, middle-class family in South Africa, Gordimer became an early critic of the racial segregation imposed by apartheid. In her novels and short stories, she explores the emotional and spiritual costs of living in a repressive, racist society. In precise, often ironic prose, Gordimer depicts the contradictions that result when ideology intersects with the daily life of individuals.

Duty of Writers Several of Gordimer's works were banned in South Africa because of their critical portrayal of apartheid. But she resists the label of "political author," and her complex, subtle fiction defies easy moral judgments. In Gordimer's view, a writer's true subject is "the consciousness of his own era." Her body of work chronicles the entire apartheid era, from its beginnings to the present-day effort to cope with its aftermath. But she focuses on the intersection of history and private lives, exploring her characters' experiences of shattered illusions, alienation, and fears of betrayal. Through these characters, usually middle-class whites, Gordimer tries to show "a terrified white consciousness in the midst of a mysterious and ominous sea of black humanity."

Her major works include the novels *A World of Strangers* (1958), *The Conservationist* (1974), and *A Sport of Nature* (1987). She has also published 11 volumes of short stories. In 1991, Gordimer received the Nobel Prize in literature.

Humanist, Not Feminist Gordimer sometimes draws parallels between women and black South Africans, portraying both as trapped in unequal relationships with white men. Yet she considers herself an advocate for human rights, not women's rights. She continues her commitment to the cause of freedom, dedicating her efforts to creating a postapartheid culture in the new South Africa. In 2004, Gordimer launched a fundraising effort to combat the HIV/AIDS epidemic in her homeland. She persuaded 21 of the world's most distinguished writers—including Chinua Achebe, Margaret Atwood, and Salman Rushdie—to contribute to a collection of short stories called *Telling Tales*, with the proceeds going to HIV/AIDS prevention and education programs in South Africa. Her high artistic standards and her strong sense of moral purpose make her an inspiring example for writers everywhere.



Author Online

Go to thinkcentral.com. KEYWORD: HML12-1340



LITERARY ANALYSIS: CULTURAL CONFLICT

You know that in literature, conflict is the struggle between opposing forces that moves the plot forward. This story centers on a **cultural conflict**, a clash between groups of people whose values, beliefs, and roles in society put them at odds with each other. The narrator of the story, a white South African, observes events from one side of this conflict. You'll need to question the narrator's statements carefully to get at the larger context. Pay special attention to

- details that describe the lives of whites and blacks
- the narrator's attitudes toward black South Africans
- causes of the tension between characters

As you read, watch for clues that reveal how living in a divided society has influenced the narrator's perceptions.

READING STRATEGY: PREDICT

To make a **prediction**, you use clues from the text to guess what will happen next. In the opening lines of this story, the narrator explains why he and his wife moved to the country.

We bought our place, ten miles out of Johannesburg on one of the main roads, to change something in ourselves. . .

As you read this story, try to anticipate what changes will occur in the lives of the main characters. Pay careful attention to the main characters' beliefs about themselves and their way of life, and consider how the events of the story might call these beliefs into question.

VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

Use context clues to determine the meaning of each boldfaced word from "Six Feet of the Country."

1. tried to **imbue** us with team spirit
2. felt **extraneous** and unnecessary
3. not **enamored** of that sickening smell
4. went to the cemetery for the **interment**
5. began to **expostulate** with him to make him see reason
6. changed his hairstyle in **emulation** of his big brother
7. so **laconic** she barely says a word
8. the basketball player's long, **attenuated** body



Complete the activities in your Reader/Writer Notebook.

Can you put a price on DIGNITY?

What helps a person hold on to self-respect? For a prisoner, perhaps it's being called by name instead of by number. For someone treated cruelly, it might be a smile or an offer of help. For people living under brutal and dehumanizing conditions, small gestures like these can become important affirmations of their human dignity.

DISCUSS What are some things that people do to preserve their sense of humanity, even in the face of inhumane circumstances? What do these responses tell you about the value people place on their dignity?



SIX FEET OF THE COUNTRY

Nadine Gordimer

BACKGROUND In Afrikaans, the language of the Dutch settlers of South Africa, the term *apartheid* means “separateness.” It refers to an official system of racial segregation that was in force from 1948 to 1991. This system restricted the education, housing, and voting rights of nonwhites; it also granted the state enhanced police powers to enforce its racial policies. In the 1970s and 1980s, after years of national and international protest, the government began to reform its apartheid policy. In 1991, the last of these discriminatory laws was finally repealed. Today, South Africa struggles with the lingering economic and social effects of the apartheid years. Gordimer wrote this story shortly after the apartheid system first went into effect.

My wife and I are not real farmers—not even Lerice, really. We bought our place, ten miles out of Johannesburg on one of the main roads, to change something in ourselves, I suppose; you seem to rattle about so much within a marriage like ours. You long to hear nothing but a deep, satisfying silence when you sound a marriage. The farm hasn’t managed that for us, of course, but it has done other things, unexpected, illogical. Lerice, who I thought would retire there in Chekhovian sadness for a month or two, and then leave the place to the servants while she tried yet again to get a part she wanted and become the actress she would like to be, has sunk into the business of running the farm with all the
10 serious intensity with which she once **imbued** the shadows in a playwright’s mind. I should have given it up long ago if it had not been for her. Her hands, once small and plain and well-kept—she was not the sort of actress who wears red paint and diamond rings—are hard as a dog’s pads. **A**

I, of course, am there only in the evenings and at week-ends. I am a partner in a luxury-travel agency, which is flourishing—needs to be, as I tell Lerice, in order to carry on the farm. Still, though I know we can’t afford it, and though the sweetish smell of the fowls Lerice breeds sickens me, so that I avoid going past their runs, the farm is beautiful in a way I had almost forgotten—especially on a Sunday morning when I get up and go out into the paddock and see not the palm
20 trees and fish pond and imitation-stone bird-bath of the suburbs but white ducks

Analyze Visuals ►

What aspects of life does the artist choose to depict?

imbue (ĩm-byōō) v. to fill, as with a quality; saturate

A PREDICT

Reread lines 1–11. Consider what the narrator reveals about his marriage. Do you expect his relationship to grow stronger or weaker over the course of the story? Explain.

Landscape, Jennifer Cross. Watercolor on paper, 387 cm × 306 cm.
© Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Art Museum, South Africa.



on the dam, the lucerne¹ field brilliant as window-dresser's grass, and the little, stocky, mean-eyed bull, lustful but bored, having his face tenderly licked by one of his ladies. Lerice comes out with her hair uncombed, in her hand a stick dripping with cattle-dip. She will stand and look dreamily for a moment, the way she would pretend to look sometimes in those plays. "They'll mate tomorrow," she will say. "This is their second day. Look how she loves him, my little Napoleon." So that when people come out to see us on Sunday afternoon, I am likely to hear myself saying, as I pour out the drinks, "When I drive back home from the city every day, past those rows of suburban houses, I wonder how the devil we ever did stand it. . . .
 30 Would you care to look around?" And there I am, taking some pretty girl and her young husband stumbling down to our river-bank, the girl catching her stockings on the mealie-stooks² and stepping over cow-turds humming with jewel-green flies while she says, ". . . the tensions of the damned city. And you're near enough to get into town to a show, too! I think it's wonderful. Why, you've got it both ways!"

And for a moment I accept the triumph as if I *had* managed it—the impossibility that I've been trying for all my life—just as if the truth was that you could get it "both ways," instead of finding yourself with not even one way or the other but a third, one you had not provided for at all.

But even in our saner moments, when I find Lerice's earthy enthusiasms just as
 40 irritating as I once found her histrionical³ ones, and she finds what she calls my "jealousy" of her capacity for enthusiasm as big a proof of my inadequacy for her as a mate as ever it was, we do believe that we have at least honestly escaped those tensions peculiar to the city about which our visitors speak. When Johannesburg people speak of "tension" they don't mean hurrying people in crowded streets, the struggle for money, or the general competitive character of city life. They mean the guns under the white men's pillows and the burglar bars on the white men's windows. They mean those strange moments on city pavements when a black man won't stand aside for a white man. **B**

Out in the country, even ten miles out, life is better than that. In the country,
 50 there is a lingering remnant of the pretransitional stage; our relationship with the blacks is almost feudal.⁴ Wrong, I suppose, obsolete, but more comfortable all round. We have no burglar bars, no gun. Lerice's farm-boys have their wives and their piccanins⁵ living with them on the land. They brew their sour beer without the fear of police raids. In fact, we've always rather prided ourselves that the poor devils have nothing much to fear, being with us; Lerice even keeps an eye on their children, with all the competence of a woman who has never had a child of her own, and she certainly doctors them all—children and adults—like babies whenever they happen to be sick. **C**

B PREDICT

Reread lines 39–48.

Explain what the narrator believes he has achieved by moving to the country. Do you expect this belief to hold true over the course of the story or to be proved false? Explain.

C CULTURAL CONFLICT

Reread lines 49–58. Note the narrator's use of words and phrases like *farm-boys*, *piccanins*, and *poor devils*. What does this **word choice** suggest about the way he views black South Africans?

1. **lucerne** (lōō-sŭrn'): a British and South African term for alfalfa, an herb grown as a pasture crop or to make hay.

2. **mealie-stooks**: a South African term for cornstalks.

3. **histrionical** (hŭs'trē-ŏn'ŭ-kəl): related to acting; excessively dramatic or emotional.

4. **feudal** (fyōōd'l): characteristic of feudalism, the medieval European economic, political, and social system in which serfs who worked the land were protected by their overlords, to whom they showed great deference.

5. **piccanins** (pŭk'ə-nŭnz'): a South African term (often considered derogatory) for native African children.

It was because of this that we were not particularly startled one night last winter
60 when the boy Albert came knocking at our window long after we had gone to bed. I
wasn't in our bed but sleeping in the little dressing-room-cum-linen room next door,
because Lerice had annoyed me, and I didn't want to find myself softening toward
her simply because of the sweet smell of the talcum powder on her flesh after her
bath. She came and woke me up. "Albert says one of the boys is very sick," she said. "I
think you'd better go down and see. He wouldn't get us up at this hour for nothing."

"What time is it?"

"What does it matter?" Lerice is maddeningly logical.

I got up awkwardly as she watched me—how is it I always feel a fool when I
have deserted her bed? After all, I know from the way she never looks at me when
70 she talks to me at breakfast the next day that she is hurt and humiliated at my not
wanting her—and I went out, clumsy with sleep. **D**

"Which of the boys is it?" I asked Albert as we followed the dance of my torch.

"He's too sick. Very sick, *Baas*,"⁶ he said.

"But who? Franz?" I remembered Franz had had a bad cough for the past week.

Albert did not answer; he had given me the path, and was walking along beside
me in the tall dead grass. When the light of the torch⁷ caught his face, I saw that
he looked acutely embarrassed. "What's this all about?" I said.

He lowered his head under the glance of the light. "It's not me, *Baas*. I don't
know. Petrus he send me."

80 Irritated, I hurried him along to the huts. And there, on Petrus's iron bedstead,
with its brick stilts, was a young man, dead. On his forehead there was still a
light, cold sweat; his body was warm. The boys stood around as they do in the
kitchen when it is discovered that someone has broken a dish—uncooperative,
silent. Somebody's wife hung about in the shadows, her hands wrung together
under her apron.

I had not seen a dead man since the war. This was very different. I felt like the
others—**extraneous**, useless.

"What was the matter?" I asked.

The woman patted at her chest and shook her head to indicate the painful
90 impossibility of breathing.

He must have died of pneumonia.

I turned to Petrus. "Who was this boy? What was he doing here?" The light of a
candle on the floor showed that Petrus was weeping. He followed me out the door.

When we were outside, in the dark, I waited for him to speak. But he didn't. "Now
come on, Petrus, you must tell me who this boy was. Was he a friend of yours?"

"He's my brother, *Baas*. He come from Rhodesia⁸ to look for work."

The story startled Lerice and me a little. The young boy had walked down from
Rhodesia to look for work in Johannesburg, had caught a chill from sleeping out

D GRAMMAR AND STYLE

Reread lines 68–71.

Notice that Gordimer
uses dashes to set off the
first-person narrator's
thoughts about marriage,
which interrupt his
description of his actions.

extraneous

(ĭk-strā'nē-əs) *adj.*

irrelevant or inessential

6. *Baas* (bās) *Afrikaans*: master; formerly used as a deferential term of address by black South Africans
when speaking to a white man. The word's English counterpart, *boss*, is also of Dutch origin.

7. **torch**: the British and South African term for a flashlight.

8. **Rhodesia** (rō-dē'zhə): a British colony in south-central Africa, sometimes called Southern Rhodesia; now
the independent nations of Zambia and Zimbabwe.

along the way, and had lain ill in his brother Petrus's hut since his arrival three
 100 days before. Our boys had been frightened to ask us for help for him because we
 had not been intended ever to know of his presence. Rhodesian natives are barred
 from entering the Union⁹ unless they have a permit; the young man was an illegal
 immigrant. No doubt our boys had managed the whole thing successfully several
 times before; a number of relatives must have walked the seven or eight hundred
 miles from poverty to the paradise of zoot suits,¹⁰ police raids, and black slum
 townships that is their *Egoli*, City of Gold—the Bantu¹¹ name for Johannesburg.
 It was merely a matter of getting such a man to lie low on our farm until a job
 could be found with someone who would be glad to take the risk of prosecution
 for employing an illegal immigrant in exchange for the services of someone as
 110 yet untainted by the city.

Well, this was one who would never get up again.

"You would think they would have felt they could tell *us*," said Lerice next
 morning. "Once the man was ill. You would have thought at least—" When she
 is getting intense over something, she has a way of standing in the middle of a
 room as people do when they are shortly to leave on a journey, looking searchingly
 about her at the most familiar objects as if she had never seen them before. I had
 noticed that in Petrus's presence in the kitchen, earlier, she had the air of being
 almost offended with him, almost hurt.

In any case, I really haven't the time or inclination any more to go into
 120 everything in our life that I know Lerice, from those alarmed and pressing eyes of
 hers, would like us to go into. She is the kind of woman who doesn't mind if she
 looks plain, or odd; I don't suppose she would even care if she knew how strange
 she looks when her whole face is out of proportion with urgent uncertainty. I said,
 "Now, I'm the one who'll have to do all the dirty work, I suppose."

She was still staring at me, trying me out with those eyes—wasting her time,
 if she only knew.

"I'll have to notify the health authorities," I said calmly. "They can't just cart
 him off and bury him. After all, we don't really know what he died of." **E**

She simply stood there, as if she had given up—simply ceased to see me at all.
 130 I don't know when I've been so irritated. "It might have been something
 contagious," I said. "God knows?" There was no answer.

I am not **enamored** of holding conversations with myself. I went out to shout
 to one of the boys to open the garage and get the car ready for my morning drive
 to town.

As I had expected, it turned out to be quite a business. I had to notify the police
 as well as the health authorities, and answer a lot of tedious questions: How was it
 I was ignorant of the boy's presence? If I did not supervise my native quarters, how
 did I know that that sort of thing didn't go on all the time? Et cetera, et cetera. And

Language Coach

Meaning of Idioms

Idioms are groups of words that have a special meaning different from the meaning of each separate word. What would *lie low* mean literally? What do you think it means in line 107?

E PREDICT

Reread lines 127–128. Note that the narrator assumes it is his right to control the body of the dead man. What problems might arise from this assumption?

enamored (ĭ-năm'ərd)
adj. infatuated; charmed

9. **Union:** the Union of South Africa, the official name of South Africa before the formation of the Republic of South Africa in 1961.

10. **zoot suits:** flashy men's suits with broad, padded shoulders and baggy trousers.

11. **Egoli** (ă-gō'lē) . . . **Bantu** (băn'tōō): Bantu is a family of languages widely spoken in southern Africa. Zulu and Xhosa are part of the Bantu language family.

when I flared up and told them that so long as my natives did their work, I didn't
140 think it my right or concern to poke my nose into their private lives, I got from
the coarse, dull-witted police sergeant one of those looks that come not from any
thinking process going on in the brain but from that faculty common to all who are
possessed by the master-race theory—a look of insanely inane certainty. He grinned
at me with a mixture of scorn and delight at my stupidity.

Then I had to explain to Petrus why the health authorities had to take away
the body for a post-mortem¹²—and, in fact, what a post-mortem was. When I
telephoned the health department some days later to find out the result, I was
told the cause of death was, as we had thought, pneumonia, and that the body
had been suitably disposed of. I went out to where Petrus was mixing a mash for
150 the fowls and told him that it was all right, there would be no trouble; his brother
had died from that pain in his chest. Petrus put down the paraffin tin and said,
“When can we go to fetch him, *Baas*?”

“To fetch him?”

“Will the *Baas* please ask them when we must come?”

I went back inside and called Lericé, all over the house. She came down the
stairs from the spare bedrooms, and I said, “*Now* what am I going to do? When
I told Petrus, he just asked calmly when they could go and fetch the body. They
think they're going to bury him themselves.”

“Well, go back and tell him,” said Lericé. “You must tell him. Why didn't you
160 tell him then?”

▼ Analyze Visuals

Notice the artist's technique of paint application. What does this help convey about the couple's relationship?

12. **post-mortem**: an examination of a corpse to determine the cause of death.



Michael and Victoria Hastings (2005), Paul Richards. Oil on canvas, 10" × 14".
© Connaught Brown Gallery, London.

When I found Petrus again, he looked up politely. “Look, Petrus,” I said. “You can’t go to fetch your brother. They’ve done it already—they’ve *buried* him, you understand?”

“Where?” he said, slowly, dully, as if he thought that perhaps he was getting this wrong.

“You see, he was a stranger. They knew he wasn’t from here, and they didn’t know he had some of his people here, so they thought they must bury him.” It was difficult to make a pauper’s grave¹³ sound like a privilege.

“Please, *Baas*, the *Baas* must ask them?” But he did not mean that he wanted to
170 know the burial-place. He simply ignored the incomprehensible machinery I told him had set to work on his dead brother; he wanted the brother back.

“But Petrus,” I said, “how can I? Your brother is buried already. I can’t ask them now.”

“Oh *Baas!*” he said. He stood with his bran-smeared hands uncurled at his sides, one corner of his mouth twitching.

“Good God, Petrus, they won’t listen to me! They can’t, anyway. I’m sorry, but I can’t do it. You understand?”

He just kept on looking at me, out of his knowledge that white men have everything, can do anything; if they don’t, it is because they won’t. **F**

180 And then, at dinner Lericé started. “You could at least phone,” she said.

“*Christ*, what d’you think I am? Am I supposed to bring the dead back to life?”

But I could not exaggerate my way out of this ridiculous responsibility that had been thrust on me. “Phone them up,” she went on. “And at least you’ll be able to tell him you’ve done it and they’ve explained that it’s impossible.”

She disappeared somewhere into the kitchen quarters after coffee. A little later she came back to tell me, “The old father’s coming down from Rhodesia to be at the funeral. He’s got a permit and he’s already on his way.”

Unfortunately, it was not impossible to get the body back. The authorities said that it was somewhat irregular, but that since the hygiene conditions had been
190 fulfilled, they could not refuse permission for exhumation.¹⁴ I found out that, with the undertaker’s charges, it would cost twenty pounds. Ah, I thought, that settles it. On five pounds a month, Petrus won’t have twenty pounds—and just as well, since it couldn’t do the dead any good. Certainly I should not offer it to him myself. Twenty pounds—or anything else within reason, for that matter—I would have spent without grudging it on doctors or medicines that might have helped the boy when he was alive. Once he was dead, I had no intention of encouraging Petrus to throw away, on a gesture, more than he spent to clothe his whole family in a year.

When I told him, in the kitchen that night, he said, “Twenty pounds?”

I said, “Yes, that’s right, twenty pounds.”

200 For a moment, I had the feeling, from the look on his face, that he was calculating. But when he spoke again I thought I must have imagined it. “We must pay twenty pounds!” he said in the far-away voice in which a person speaks of something so unattainable that it does not bear thinking about.

F CULTURAL CONFLICT

Reread lines 169–179.

What clash of values has put Petrus and the narrator in conflict with each other? What power does the narrator have in this situation that Petrus does not?

13. **pauper’s grave**: an unmarked, often communal grave used for those unable to pay for private burial.

14. **exhumation** (ěg’zyōō-mā’shən): the removal of a corpse from the grave.

“All right, Petrus,” I said in dismissal, and went back to the living-room.

The next morning before I went to town, Petrus asked to see me. “Please *Baas*,” he said, awkwardly handing me a bundle of notes. They’re so seldom on the giving rather than the receiving side, poor devils, that they don’t really know how to hand money to a white man. There it was, the twenty pounds, in ones and halves, some creased and folded until they were soft as dirty rags, others smooth
210 and fairly new—Franz’s money, I suppose, and Albert’s, and Dora the cook’s, and Jacob the gardener’s, and God knows who else’s besides, from all the farms and small holdings round about. I took it in irritation more than in astonishment, really—irritation at the waste, the uselessness of this sacrifice by people so poor. Just like the poor everywhere, I thought, who stint themselves the decencies of life in order to insure themselves the decencies of death. So incomprehensible to people like Lerice and me, who regard life as something to be spent extravagantly and, if we think about death at all, regard it as the final bankruptcy. **G**

The servants don’t work on Saturday afternoon anyway, so it was a good day for the funeral. Petrus and his father had borrowed our donkey-cart to fetch
220 the coffin from the city, where, Petrus told Lerice on their return, everything was “nice”—the coffin waiting for them, already sealed up to save them from what must have been a rather unpleasant sight after two weeks’ **interment**. (It had taken all that time for the authorities and the undertaker to make the final arrangements for moving the body.) All morning, the coffin lay in Petrus’s hut, awaiting the trip to the little old burial-ground, just outside the eastern boundary of our farm, that was a relic of the days when this was a real farming district rather than a fashionable rural estate. It was pure chance that I happened to be down there near the fence when the procession came past; once again Lerice had forgotten her promise to me and had made the house uninhabitable on a Saturday
230 afternoon. I had come home and been infuriated to find her in a pair of filthy old slacks and with her hair uncombed since the night before, having all the varnish scraped off the living-room floor, if you please. So I had taken my No. 8 iron and gone off to practice my approach shots. In my annoyance I had forgotten about the funeral, and was reminded only when I saw the procession coming up the path along the outside of the fence toward me; from where I was standing, you can see the graves quite clearly, and that day the sun glinted on bits of broken pottery, a lopsided homemade cross, and jam-jars brown with rain-water and dead flowers. **H**

I felt a little awkward, and did not know whether to go on hitting my golf ball or stop at least until the whole gathering was decently past. The donkey-cart
240 creaks and screeches with every revolution of the wheels and it came along in a slow, halting fashion somehow peculiarly suited to the two donkeys who drew it, their little potbellies rubbed and rough, their heads sunk between the shafts, and their ears flattened back with an air submissive and downcast; peculiarly suited, too, to the group of men and women who came along slowly behind. The patient ass. Watching, I thought, you can see now why the creature became a Biblical symbol.¹⁵ Then the procession drew level with me and stopped, so I had to put

G CULTURAL CONFLICT

Reread lines 205–217. Describe the narrator’s response to the servants’ sacrifice. What does he fail to understand about their motives?

interment (ĭn-tûr’mənt)
n. burial

H PREDICT

Reread lines 218–237. What does the placement of the narrator at this scene lead you to expect?

15. **creature . . . symbol:** In the Bible, the donkey, or ass, is sometimes presented as a symbol of patience, submission, and endurance.



Solomon (2005), Louise Ynclan. Oil on canvas, 90 cm × 90 cm.

down my club. The coffin was taken down off the cart—it was a shiny, yellow-
varnished wood, like cheap furniture—and the donkeys twitched their ears
against the flies. Petrus, Franz, Albert and the old father from Rhodesia hoisted
250 it on their shoulders and the procession moved on, on foot. It was really a very
awkward moment. I stood there rather foolishly at the fence, quite still, and slowly
they filed past, not looking up, the four men bent beneath the shiny wooden box,
and the straggling troop of mourners. All of them were servants or neighbors’
servants whom I knew as casual, easygoing gossipers about our lands or kitchen.
I heard the old man’s breathing.

I had just bent to pick up my club again when there was a sort of jar in the flowing
solemnity of their processional mood; I felt it at once, like a wave of heat along the
air, or one of those sudden currents of cold catching at your legs in a placid stream.
The old man’s voice was muttering something, and they bumped into one another,
260 some pressing to go on, others hissing at them to be still. I could see that they were
embarrassed, but they could not ignore the voice; it was much the way that the
mumblings of a prophet, though not clear at first, arrest the mind. The corner of
the coffin the old man carried was sagging at an angle; he seemed to be trying to get
out from under the weight of it. Now Petrus **expostulated** with him.

expostulate
(ĭk-spōs’chə-lāt’) v. to
reason with someone, in
order to change his or her
actions or plans

The little boy who had been left to watch the donkeys dropped the reins and ran to see. I don't know why—unless it was for the same reason people crowd round someone who has fainted in a cinema—but I parted the wires of the fence and went through, after him.

Petrus lifted his eyes to me—to anybody—with distress and horror. The old
270 man from Rhodesia had let go of the coffin entirely, and the three others, unable to support it on their own, had laid it on the ground, in the pathway. Already there was a film of dust lightly wavering up its shiny sides. I did not understand what the old man was saying; I hesitated to interfere. But now the whole seething group turned on my silence. The old man himself came over to me, with his hands outspread and shaking, and spoke directly to me, saying something that I could tell from the tone, without understanding the words, was shocking and extraordinary.

“What is it, Petrus? What’s wrong?” I appealed.

Petrus threw up his hands, bowed his head in a series of hysterical shakes, then thrust his face up at me suddenly.

280 “He says, ‘My son was not so heavy.’”

Silence. I could hear the old man breathing; he kept his mouth a little open as old people do.

“My son was young and thin,” he said, at last, in English.

Again silence. Then babble broke out. The old man thundered against everybody; his teeth were yellowed and few, and he had one of those fine, grizzled, sweeping moustaches that one doesn’t often see nowadays, which must have been grown in **emulation** of early Empire builders.¹⁶ It seemed to frame all his utterances with a special validity, perhaps merely because it was the symbol of the traditional wisdom of age—an idea so fearfully rooted that it carries still something awesome beyond
290 reason. He shocked them; they thought he was mad, but they had to listen to him. With his own hands he began to prise the lid off the coffin and three of the men came forward to help him. Then he sat down on the ground; very old, very weak, and unable to speak, he merely lifted a trembling hand toward what was there. He abdicated, he handed it over to them; he was no good any more.

They crowded round to look (and so did I), and now they forgot the nature of this surprise and the occasion of grief to which it belonged, and for a few minutes were carried up in the astonishment of the surprise itself. They gasped and flared noisily with excitement. I even noticed the little boy who had held the donkeys jumping up and down, almost weeping with rage because the backs of the grown-
300 ups crowded him out of his view.

In the coffin was someone no one had ever seen before: a heavily built, rather light-skinned native with a neatly stitched scar on his forehead—perhaps from a blow in a brawl that had also dealt him some other, slower-working injury which had killed him.

I wrangled with the authorities for a week over that body. I had the feeling that they were shocked, in a **laconic** fashion, by their own mistake, but that in the confusion of their anonymous dead they were helpless to put it right. They said

Language Coach

Connotations/Denotations

One meaning of a word can affect the **connotations**—the connected feelings or images—of the other. *Seething* can mean either “bubbling and boiling” or “angry.” How are the connotations of *seething* in line 273 more specific than those of *angry*?

emulation

(ěm'yə-lā'shən)

n. imitation of an admired example

laconic (lə-kŏn'ĭk) *adj.*

using few words; concise

16. **Empire builders:** British colonizers.

to me, “We are trying to find out,” and “We are still making enquiries.” It was as if at any moment they might conduct me into their mortuary¹⁷ and say, “There! Lift
310 up the sheets; look for him—your poultry boy’s brother. There are so many black faces—surely one will do?”

And every evening when I got home Petrus was waiting in the kitchen. “Well, they’re trying. They’re still looking. The *Baas* is seeing to it for you, Petrus,” I would tell him. “God, half the time I should be in the office I’m driving around the back end of town chasing after this affair,” I added aside, to Lericé, one night.

She and Petrus both kept their eyes turned on me as I spoke, and, oddly, for those moments they looked exactly alike, though it sounds impossible: my wife, with her high, white forehead and her **attenuated** Englishwoman’s body, and the poultry boy, with his horny bare feet below khaki trousers tied at the knee with
320 string and the peculiar rankness of his nervous sweat coming from his skin.

“What makes you so indignant, so determined about this now?” said Lericé suddenly.

I stared at her. “It’s a matter of principle. Why should they get away with a swindle? It’s time these officials had a jolt from someone who’ll bother to take the trouble.”

She said, “Oh.” And as Petrus slowly opened the kitchen door to leave, sensing that the talk had gone beyond him, she turned away too.

I continued to pass on assurances to Petrus every evening, but although what I said was the same, and the voice in which I said it was the same, every evening it
330 sounded weaker. At last, it became clear that we would never get Petrus’s brother back, because nobody really knew where he was. Somewhere in a graveyard as uniform as a housing scheme, somewhere under a number that didn’t belong to him, or in the medical school, perhaps, laboriously reduced to layers of muscles and strings of nerves? Goodness knows. He had no identity in this world anyway. ❶

It was only then, and in a voice of shame, that Petrus asked me to try and get the money back.

“From the way he asks, you’d think he was robbing his dead brother,” I said to Lericé later. But as I’ve said, Lericé had got so intense about this business that she couldn’t even appreciate a little ironic smile.

340 I tried to get the money; Lericé tried. We both telephoned and wrote and argued, but nothing came of it. It appeared that the main expense had been the undertaker, and, after all, he had done his job. So the whole thing was a complete waste, even more of a waste for the poor devils than I had thought it would be.

The old man from Rhodesia was about Lericé’s father’s size, so she gave him one of her father’s old suits and he went back home rather better off, for the winter, than he had come. ☞

attenuated
(ə-těn’yōō-ā’tīd) *adj.*
slender; thin **attenuate** *v.*

❶ **CULTURAL CONFLICT**
Reread lines 331–334.
What does this passage convey about the value white society places on black South Africans?

17. **mortuary** (môr’chōō-ěr’ē): a place where bodies of the dead are kept before burial or cremation; a funeral parlor.

Comprehension

1. **Recall** What happens to Petrus's brother?
2. **Recall** What does Petrus ask the narrator to do for him?
3. **Summarize** What disturbance occurs during the funeral procession?

Literary Analysis

4. **Make Inferences About the Narrator** Reread the narrator's comment about Petrus's father in lines 344–346. Explain what it reveals about the narrator's understanding of what has occurred. What has the narrator learned by the end of the story?
5. **Examine Predictions** Recall your prediction about the narrator's relationship with his wife. Did the events of the story support your prediction? Cite details to support your answer.
6. **Analyze Cultural Conflict** In this story, Gordimer tries to show how interactions between individuals are distorted by the racial divisions of South African society. Consider the interactions described in each of the following passages. In each case, how does the racial divide aggravate the characters' misunderstandings and anxieties?
 - the report of the young man's death (lines 75–81)
 - Petrus's request for his brother's body (lines 145–160)
 - the funeral procession (lines 246–255)
7. **Interpret Title** Explain the meaning of the title "Six Feet of the Country." Based on your interpretation of the title, what do you consider to be the message of the story?
8. **Compare Characters' Perspectives** In what ways would the story change if it were told by Lerice? by Petrus? In your answer, mention specific scenes that would be told differently, as well as the types of details that would be included or excluded in the new version of the story.



READING 2C Relate the characters, setting, and theme of a literary work to the historical, social, and economic ideas of its time. **5A** Analyze how complex plot structures and devices function and advance the action in a work of fiction.

Literary Criticism

9. **Critical Interpretations** South African poet Dennis Brutus once called Nadine Gordimer "the living example of how dehumanized South African society has become." In his view, her work lacked warmth and feeling and her observations were so detached that they reflected "the coldness of a machine." Based on your reading of this story, do you agree with this view? Support your answer with details.

Can you put a price on **DIGNITY?**

Why is it so important to the servants to give Petrus's brother the dignity of a proper burial? Cite details from the story in your response.

Vocabulary in Context

▲ VOCABULARY PRACTICE

Choose the word that is not related in meaning to the other words.

- 1. (a) imbue, (b) instill, (c) embarrass, (d) infuse
- 2. (a) extraneous, (b) necessary, (c) relevant, (d) germane
- 3. (a) enchanted, (b) enamored, (c) frustrated, (d) captivated
- 4. (a) interment, (b) burial, (c) visit, (d) sepulcher
- 5. (a) expostulate, (b) expose, (c) reveal, (d) divulge
- 6. (a) emulation, (b) scorn, (c) contempt, (d) disdain
- 7. (a) laconic, (b) silent, (c) smooth, (d) taciturn
- 8. (a) attenuated, (b) thick, (c) compact, (d) rotund

WORD LIST

attenuated
emulation
enamored
expostulate
extraneous
imbue
interment
laconic

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY IN SPEAKING

- approach
- assume
- environment
- method
- strategy

What is the best **strategy** for avoiding misunderstandings? When can you **assume** that you are communicating clearly? Using at least two of the Academic Vocabulary words, describe to a partner a scene that involves a misunderstanding.

VOCABULARY STRATEGY: THE LATIN ROOT *terr*

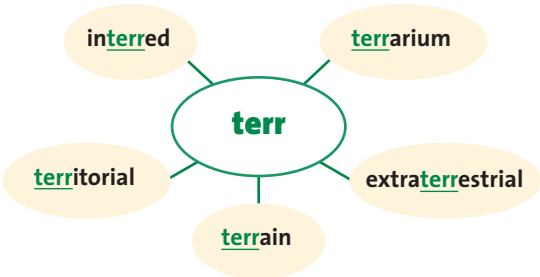
The root *terr* comes from the Latin *terra*, meaning “earth” or “land.” The root sometimes appears with only one *r*, as in the case of the word *interment*, which means “burial in the earth.” The same root is found in a number of other English words from a variety of different subject areas, from science and biology to geography. To understand words with *terr*, use context clues as well as your knowledge of the root.

PRACTICE Choose the word from the word web that best completes each sentence. Consider what you know about the Latin root *terr* and other word parts shown. If necessary, consult a dictionary.

- 1. The pioneers struggled across the rugged ____ in a covered wagon.
- 2. In winter we grew plants in our glass ____.
- 3. After the funeral, the body was ____ in the cemetery.
- 4. Dogs can be very ____, trying to keep other animals or people away from the property where they live.
- 5. The science fiction novel told what happened when powerful ____ creatures visited our planet.



READING 1A Determine the meaning of technical academic English words in multiple content areas derived from Latin roots.



Interactive Vocabulary

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Conventions in Writing

◆ GRAMMAR AND STYLE: Choose Effective Point Of View

Review the **Grammar and Style** note on page 1345. By choosing to tell her story in the first person (using the **pronouns** *I* and *we*), Gordimer gives the reader an intimate view of the narrator’s character. In doing so, she not only explores the complexity of his personal life but also reveals the prevailing attitudes of whites in South Africa during the apartheid era. Here is an example from the story:

“... And you’re near enough to get into town to a show, too! I think it’s wonderful. Why, you’ve got it both ways!”

And for a moment I accept the triumph as if I had managed it—the impossibility that I’ve been trying for all my life—just as if the truth was that you could get it “both ways.”... (lines 33–37)

Notice how Gordimer uses **dashes** to signal an interruption of thought in which the narrator provides revealing commentary about himself.

PRACTICE The following paragraph is written in the third person. Revise the paragraph, writing it in the first person and adding details as needed to create a greater sense of intimacy with the character. Use one or more dashes to indicate a shift in the character’s thoughts or feelings.

He turned off the highway and headed north on Second Avenue. Growing up, he often felt ashamed of his shabby neighborhood, but as he drove through it now he was comforted by the familiar sights he passed. There was the little grocery on Hawthorn Street, where he used to sit out front on the rickety bench trading baseball cards with his friends. He wondered where those friends were now and whether they would even recognize him.

I turned off the highway—the same highway where I’d test-driven my first car—and headed north on Second Avenue.

READING-WRITING CONNECTION



Expand your understanding of “Six Feet of the Country” by responding to this prompt. Then use the **revising tips** to improve your journal entry.

WRITING PROMPT

WRITE A JOURNAL ENTRY Although Lerice is an important character in “Six Feet of the Country,” she is portrayed from her husband’s perspective. However, by carefully analyzing what she says and does, you can uncover clues about her feelings. Write a **three-to-five-paragraph journal entry** in which Lerice describes one of the events in the story.

REVISING TIPS

- Use dashes to indicate a change in the character’s thoughts or feelings
- Check to see that you are including only Lerice’s point of view.



WRITING 14 Write literary texts to express ideas and feelings about real or imagined people, events, and ideas. **ORAL AND WRITTEN CONVENTIONS 18** Correctly and consistently use conventions of punctuation and capitalization.

Interactive
Revision



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